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INFO RUEHBE/AMEMBASSY BELMOPAN 0023
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 7727
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 9283
RUEHG/AMEMBASSY GEORGETOWN 0709
RUEHGT/AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA 2274
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ SEP LIMA 5360
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA 2049
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA 0593
RUEHPO/AMEMBASSY PARAMARIBO 0118
RUEHPU/AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE 0660
RUEHSP/AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN 0199
RUEHQ/AMEMBASSY QUITO 5961
RUEHSN/AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR 1754
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SUBJECT: USNS COMFORT VISIT TO COLOMBIA

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. USNS COMFORT anchored near Buenaventura, Colombia from August 22-28 during its humanitarian assistance deployment to the region. Coordinating with Embassy Bogota, Colombian authorities, and NGOs, the COMFORT team provided 25,815 medical, dental and veterinary services and training to local citizens, health care providers, university students, and medical clinics. Colombian government and military officials at all levels toured the ship and its operations ashore. The can-do attitude of COMFORT and its U.S. and Colombian partners on the ground overcame many logistical and weather hurdles. As a result, the ship received unanimously positive press coverage in the national and local media, with the USG portrayed as a positive and helpful ally in Colombia.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) The US Military Group in Bogota, Joint Task-Force Bravo, and the Embassy's Public Affairs (PAS) and Political sections worked closely with COMFORT in coordinating with Colombia's MFA, MOD, Ministry of Health, and other local institutions to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Colombia.

¶3. (SBU) Medical services provided included treatment of 6,597 patients, including 101 surgeries, 733 dental exams, 467 dental varnishes, 4,050 immunizations, 2,046 eye exams, the distribution of 1,605 eyeglasses, and dispensed 8,404 drugs from the ship's pharmacy. COMFORT taught 1,316 students about environmental health, infectious disease control, and other public-health issues in 26 sessions. Colombians primarily received COMFORT's services aboard the ship, in the city's coliseum in Buenaventura, at a naval base at Bahia Malaga, and at the river community of La Sierpe. Additionally, PAS organized a program with Buenaventura's university students, characterized by an energetic, positive exchange between the USG and the Colombian people. The U.S. Navy Show Band bolstered the event with a lively performance for the university students and entertained thousands of patients during two hugely popular concerts held on August 23 as part of as part of Embassy's Education and Cultural Day.

¶4. (SBU) The Naval Construction Battalion embarked aboard COMFORT, known as the Seabees, built a multi-purpose medical clinic for the impoverished people of La Sierpe and renovated parts of Buenaventura's medical clinics. Project Handclasp donated medical

supplies worth well over \$10,000 to the people of Buenaventura. Preventative medicine physicians and technicians also provided veterinary services to local farmers and animal owners, including vaccinations of livestock, as well as education and training to prevent future disease and worm infestations. Colombians benefited from 25,815 encounters from the COMFORT team, including medical and dental services, surgeries, examinations, procedures, vaccinations and prescriptions, as well as medical services provided by Project Hope volunteers.

¶15. (SBU) USNS COMFORT's visit drew participation from senior officials of the Colombian national and local governments, contributing to the Embassy's efforts to win support from the people of Buenaventura, an area of substantial drug trafficking and FARC terrorist activities. On August 26, Colombian Minister of Defense Juan Manuel Santos toured the ship along with Admiral Guillermo Barrera, Commander of the Colombian Navy. On August 27, a group of distinguished visitors, including General Freddy Padilla the Commander of the Colombian Armed Forces, William Farrel the Canadian Charge d'Affaires, and Colombian Health Ministry officials, toured the ship with the Embassy's then Charge d'Affaires, Brian Nichols. Both groups also visited COMFORT's main treatment facility ashore at the city's coliseum and enjoyed extensive, positive media coverage.

¶16. (SBU) The Embassy's original press strategy complied with COMFORT's desire to limit press tours of the ship to one day so that the ship could devote its resources to medical services. However, due to dangerous weather conditions, the media could not board the ship on the designated Media Day, August 24. The ship and the Embassy's public affairs officers adapted and arranged for 24 members of the press to board COMFORT over the following three days, resulting in 34 television broadcasts, 20 news articles (15 in major newspapers, 2 on-line, and 3 in news magazines), and 13 radio broadcasts; PAS expects the publication of more major weekly magazine articles over the coming weeks. The broadcasts and articles thus far have been universally positive, previously unheard of in Colombia's often negative media environment. COMFORT agreed to bring two members of the media to the ship by helicopter to accompany the Commodore to the shore for the opening ceremony on August 22. The reporters shot video and stills of the ship on the flight out to COMFORT, interviewed some of the leadership, and covered the inauguration ceremony itself. PAS also convinced COMFORT to dedicate one of its two helicopters to transport media in order to cover the Distinguished Visitors tours of the ship. The overall successful interagency partnership resulted from having PAS staff both aboard ship and co-located in the U.S. MILGROUP's operations center on the ground in Buenaventura. In each instance, the media provided substantial national coverage which could not have happened without close coordination with COMFORT. The ship's unofficial motto, Semper Gumby, accurately reflects their ability and willingness to always remain flexible and successfully adapt to changing circumstances.

¶17. (U) Television coverage included 34 national and regional newscasts. The press dedicated considerable time to human interest stories, including one in which COMFORT operated on a child allowing him to walk. The child's mother called COMFORT's visit "like a gift from God." Many other broadcasts spoke of cooperation and friendship between the two countries. PAS also nurtured its working relationships with regional press, especially the Afro-Colombian journalists including TelePacífico, a major television station.

¶18. (SBU) The logistics and weather issues encountered in Colombia cannot be overstated. Due to Buenaventura's shallow harbor and COMFORT's deep draft, the ship had to anchor 20 nautical miles from the city's center. This distance complicated the movement of COMFORT's personnel and supplies, necessitating the significant use of boats and helicopters in order to move the COMFORT team to its various sites in Buenaventura, Bahia Malaga, and La Sierpe. This reduced the number of services COMFORT could have otherwise provided. Many members of COMFORT, including personnel from the U.S. Navy, Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Public Health Service, Canadian forces, and the NGO Project Hope, endured daily, and sometimes dangerous, one-hour boat rides each way, oftentimes in the rain and heavy-seas. The unanimously positive media coverage demonstrates that the COMFORT leadership and crew deserve high praise for successfully adapting so well to the distant anchorage,

severe weather, and complicated logistics.

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